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The Small-Woodland Owner in the Missouri Ozarks—A Close-Up

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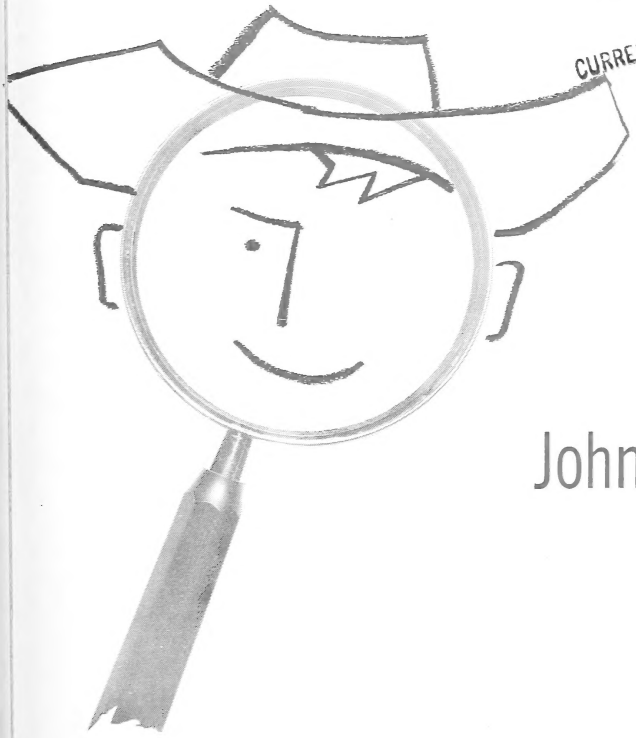

John H. Farrell

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The Author

JOHN H. FARRELL joined the Central States Station staff in 1957 as a forest economist. He was assigned to work on forest ownership, forest industry economics, and forest production economics studies in Missouri. John studied forestry and public administration at Syracuse University, receiving his doctorate in 1952. He has been an officer in the U.S. Army Air Corps, an instructor in forest management at Syracuse, and a forest appraiser for the New York State Board of Equalization and Assessment. John is now staff assistant in the Division of Programs and Special Projects in the Washington office of the Forest Service. He is a member of American Society for Public Administration, Society of American Foresters, Sigma Xi (National science honorary society), American Association for the Advancement of Science, and Alpha Xi Sigma and Xi Sigma Pi (forestry honorary societies).

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Summary

The typical small-private-forest owner in the Missouri Ozarks regards forestry and public forestry agencies favorably. Although he has done little or nothing about managing his woodland, his lack of interest in management may be attributed to indifference to his woodland property or lack of understanding as to its potential timber productivity. Progress already made with the more receptive owners suggests that a sound program of public service and education is a significant step toward better management of small, private woodlands.

The typical small-forest owner in the eastern Missouri Ozarks:

- Is a farmer.
- Is more than 50 years old.
- Lives in the county where his forest is located.
- Owns about 500 acres of forest land.
- Bought his forest land.
- Holds it about 16 years.

The Small-Woodland Owner in the Missouri Ozarks— A Close-Up

John H. Farrell

The small-forest owners of the Nation control three-fourths of America's private commercial timberland. In Missouri 94 percent of the commercial forest land is in tracts of less than 5,000 acres held by more than 200,000 owners. The key to America's future timber supply is in the hands of the small-woodland owners *(7)*.[1] Their characteristics and attitudes as owners and the condition of their properties are important to the national economy. They will be called upon in future years to supply an ever-increasing volume of timber products for national consumption.

Understanding the small landowner and his problems is essential to encouraging increased forest production. Extension workers, educators, public administrators, and industrial land managers are interested in the small-woodland owner, who he is, where he lives, what he thinks, and why he behaves as he does. A recent study sought answers to some of these questions in the eastern Missouri Ozarks, a natural forest area with many small, privately owned, forest holdings.

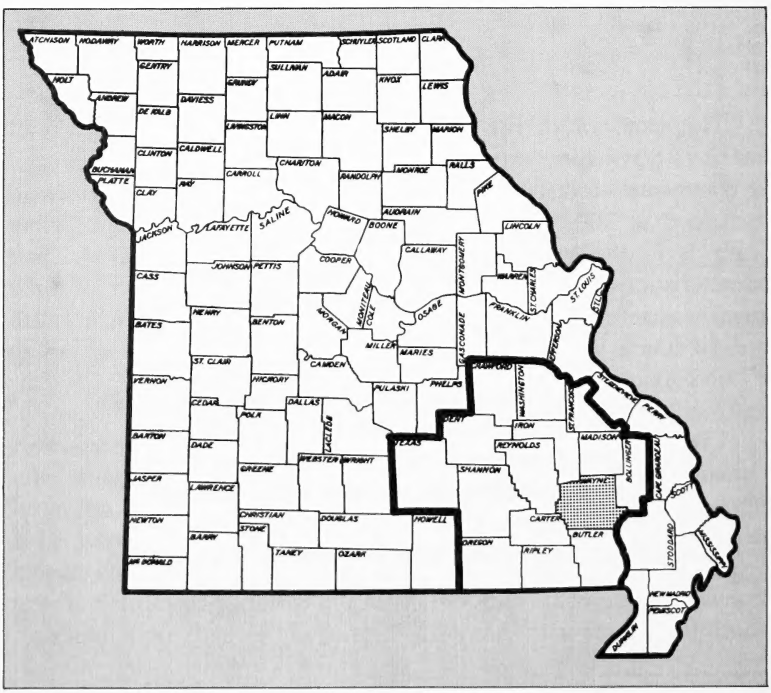
[1]Numbers in parenthesis refer to Literature Cited, p. 15.

The Area and The Sample

The Area

The study focused on Wayne County in southeast Missouri and its relation to the surrounding eastern Missouri Ozark Region. Wayne County is 80 percent forested and one of a group of 15 similar counties in the most densely forested part of Missouri (fig. 1) *(5)*. This region is defined by sociologists as a homogeneous area. Such variables as age, residency, family size, farm and nonfarm ownership distribution, family living indices, education, tenure, income, farm production, employment, health conditions, and others indicate that sociological conditions in the region are uniform *(3)*.

FIGURE 1. — Location of Wayne County and the surrounding homogeneous area.



For years most farms in the general area have not been paying well. More than 87 percent had gross sales of less than $2,500 in 1954. Of the nonfarm households, 27 percent had incomes of less than $1,000 in 1955 *(1)*.

The number of farms and the area of land in farms have both been decreasing *(6)*. Population has been decreasing since 1910 except for a period during the 1930's *(2)*.

Government is the largest single owner of forest land in the area. Of the private forest land, individuals own 78 percent, corporations own 7 percent, unsettled estates 5 percent, and partnerships 4 percent. A small fraction of owners could not be classified.

The Sample

One hundred and five randomly selected owners of forest land in Wayne County were interviewed in 1958. These individuals owned 52,747 acres of forest land. Government owners, corporate owners, owners of unsettled estates, and owners with 3 acres of land or less were not interviewed. Most resident-owners were interviewed directly; out-of-state owners were contacted by mail or telephone or both. Each woodland was appraised on the ground.

The Small-Forest Owner

Acquisition

The Ozark owner acquires most of his land by purchase. Title to the land is inherited in 11 percent of the cases, but the area transferred this way is relatively small (table 1).

Table 1.--Means by which owners acquired their small-private forest tracts in Wayne County, Missouri

(In percent)

Form of acquisition	Owners	Forest area
Purchase	82	91
Inheritance	11	8
Other[1/]	4	1
Unknown	3	-
Total	100	100

1/ Trade, foreclosure, in lieu of debt.

Occupation

Twenty-eight percent of the owners claim farming as their major occupation. This is the largest single occupation group, but farmers own only 20 percent of the forest land in small-private tracts. Business and professional persons control the largest forest area (39 percent) and are the second largest group among small-private owners. Retirees, although small in number, control nearly one-third of the forest land (table 2). Operators of wood-using plants, surprisingly enough, own a negligible amount of forest land.

Table 2.--Distribution of small-forest owners and the land they own by occupation in Wayne County, Missouri

(In percent)

Occupation	Owners	Forest land owned
Farmer	28	20
Business and profession	26	39
Wage earner	24	6
Housewife-widow	3	4
Retired	16	31
Other	3	--
Total	100	100

Age

Seventy-three percent of the owners were over 50 years of age and 33 percent were over 60 years at the time of interview. Only 5 percent were younger than 40 years. Eighty-two percent of the small-

private-forest land in the county was controlled by persons over 50 years old.

Residency

Most small-forest owners are residents of the county in which their land is located. However, more than half (53 percent) of the forest land is owned by nonresidents.

Nonresidents were classified into two types—those living in-state but out-of-county and those living out-of-state. The first group controls 38 percent of the private-forest land in small tracts. Out-of-state owners control 15 percent. Only 38 percent of all owners are nonresidents of the county. Out-of-state owners are outnumbered by "native" owners 2 to 1.

Nearly half the residents live on their land, but they control only 30 percent of the forest area. About one-third of the forest land is controlled by persons living from 30 to several hundred miles from their timber tracts (table 3).

Table 3.--Small-private-forest tracts in Wayne County, Missouri, by distance from tract to owner's residence

(In percent)

Distance from tract to residence (miles)	Owners	Forest area
Residence on tract[1/]	47	30
Less than 10	12	14
10-29	5	20
30-99	5	1
100-199	16	18
200+	15	17
Total	100	100

1/ Includes those residing within 1 mile.

The Land and The Timber

Woodland Size[2]

Three-fourths of the private-forest land in Wayne County is controlled by about one-fourth of the owners (table 4). The average size of a small-private tract is 602 acres and contains about 507 acres of forest. Although three-fourths of the tracts are less than 500 acres in size, three-fourths of the forest area in the county is in tracts of 500 acres or larger. However, the largest class of owners is the group having 100- to 499-acre tracts.

Many owners of forest land in the Ozarks hold title to timber tracts in several counties. Fourteen percent of all owners studied had holdings outside of Wayne County. The average total area of all their holdings was 2,251 acres each.

Table 4.--Small-private-forest-land holdings by size of ownership in Wayne County, Missouri

(In percent)

Size of forest ownership (acres)	Forest land	Owners
3-49	1	21
50-99	2	16
100-499	16	39
500-4,999	52	19
5,000+	22	2
Unknown[1]	7	3
Total	100	100

[1] No reply or indeterminate.

Tenure

Most small-forest tracts have been held by their present owners about 16 years, although tenure ranged from less than a year to 59 years. One-third of the owners had held their property less than 10 years, three-fourths less than 25 years (table 5). Only about one-third of the small-private-forest area in the county had been held more than 25 years without changing owners.

[2]Although surrounding counties are similar, these data are not directly representative of conditions outside Wayne County.

Table 5.--Small-private-forest tracts by years of ownership in Wayne County, Missouri

(In percent)

Years held by present owner	Owners holding land	Forest area held
Less than 5	11	11
5-9	22	17
10-24	42	39
25+	23	32
Unknown	2	1
Total	100	100

Timber Tract Value

Forest tracts that could be valued at more than $20 per acre in the 1958 land market were rare—only about 2 percent. Nearly three-fourths of the forest land was estimated to be worth $10 or less per acre due to the deteriorated condition of the timber stands.

Timber Sales

More than half the owners sell timber from their woodland (fig. 2). They control about three-fourths of all small-private-forest area.

FIGURE 2. — Timber sales on small-private-forests in Wayne County.

About one-third of all timber sales made by owners of small-forest tracts are executed under written agreement. Half the sales are made on the basis of a measurement of the cut timber. The lump-sum method of selling is the next most common method, accounting for 35 percent of all sales. A common complaint of the sellers was that they did not feel their timber volume was estimated accurately.

There is a relation between tract size and timber-sale frequency: the smaller the tract, the fewer sales. Farmers, wage earners, and retirees are among those owners who sell more frequently. On the other hand, many business and professional owners own large tracts but do not seem to sell their timber as readily as other large-tract owners.

Forestry Practice on the Land

The Owner and Forestry Practice

Little forestry is practiced on most tracts. Only 10 percent of the owners of small-private tracts reported they were practicing any forestry (fig. 3). However, they did control 40 percent of the forest land. Much of the forestry they practiced was applied unevenly to the forest area, and not all the forest area they owned was being managed.

For the most part, managed forest land is under the Missouri Conservation Commission Forest Crop Law. This law provides for a deferred-yield tax in lieu of an annual ad valorem tax for owners agreeing to manage their timber under the guidance of State forestry personnel. Twenty-nine percent of the forest land held by participants was either not suitable for registration under the law or was being withheld for some other reason.

Owners registered under the Forest Crop Law generally favored the program. Benefits especially appreciated by owners were tax relief, fire protection, and protection against timber trespass.

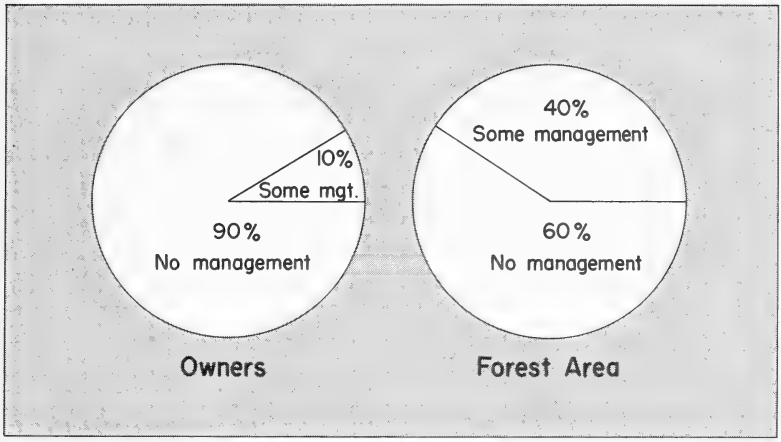


FIGURE 3. — Forest management planning in Wayne County.

Forestry Services

Only 11 percent of small-tract owners had ever consulted a forester for advice in managing their woodlands. The attitude of this group toward the service received and toward the forester was generally good. Two-thirds of them would use the service again if it were free, slightly less if a nominal charge were made.

Among all owners, including those who had used a forester's services in the past, less than 7 percent voiced any irritation with forestry agencies or individual foresters, and 21 percent commented favorably. Seventy-two percent were noncommittal. These comments were all volunteered.

Among owners not using a forester on their land, indifference to the resource and its value seems to be the outstanding reason. About one-fourth of the owners stated outright they simply were not interested enough to seek advice.

The Agricultural Conservation Program

Nearly one-fourth of the owners interviewed were unaware of ACP forestry practice payments,[3] although a full-scale program is

[3]The Agricultural Conservation Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture shares cost payments with landowners for applying conservation and forestry practices on the land and provides technical advice and service.

established in the county; and at least 58 percent, if aware of it, were indifferent to it. Twenty-five percent said lack of interest in forestry was their main reason for not participating. Thirteen percent wished to avoid entanglement with government because of "red tape," dislike of subsidies, or other reasons. Not one owner interviewed had participated in the program.

Tree Planting

Tree planting is regarded by the general public as one of the major practices in forestry. Ninety-seven percent of all owners interviewed during the study had never planted trees. Few indicated any interest in doing so. Lack of plantable area was the reason given in 30 percent of the cases, but general indifference to the idea was clearly evidenced.

Grazing

Field checks showed that more than half the tracts, totaling nearly 60 percent of the forest area, were grazed to some extent (table 6). Considering that some townships in Wayne County were open range at the time of survey, this is not a high percentage.

Table 6.--Small-forest tracts and grazing use in Wayne County, Missouri

(In percent)

Grazing Use	Owners	Forest area
None	38	38
Light	32	45
Heavy	22	14
Unknown	8	3
Total	100	100

Owner Opinions and Attitudes

It is sometimes difficult to evaluate a person's attitude on the basis of his answers to questions involving opinion. The wording of questions, vagueness in answers, and the meanings of words can alter results. This area of study was exploratory in nature and results are not entirely conclusive. However, significant differences were noted between groups and may indicate part of the influences at work among owners.

Profitability of Forestry

Most owners doubt that forestry would pay on their land. To the question, "Do you think it would be profitable to invest your money in any forestry practices on your land?" the replies received were: Yes—35 percent, no—52 percent, and undecided—13 percent.

When the question was rephrased to bring in consideration of the cost of management, the answers were somewhat different: Yes—29 percent, no— 39 percent, and undecided—32 percent.

A shift to the undecided position occurred after the owner weighed the implications of management.

Taxes—An Influence on Management?

Forest-land taxes are not generally a force altering forest management decisions. To the question, "Do taxes on your forest land and timber materially affect your forest management decisions?" the following answers were received: Yes—3 percent, no—78 percent, and no reply—19 percent.

There was no indication that owners replying in the negative differed significantly from the total population. It should be noted, however, that few owners are managing their timberland.

Attitude Toward Timber Management-Lease Services

Two-thirds of the owners who did not manage their forests stated they would not be interested in having their property managed for them if management-lease services were available. Twenty-seven percent,

however, would be interested in this type of service if the terms were favorable.

Those interested in management-lease service varied by their occupation and the distance from their residence to their timber tract. Business and professional persons showed greater interest in such services than other types of owners (fig. 4). Persons living more than 200 miles away from their timber tract also expressed greater interest in management-lease services than those residing on their tracts.

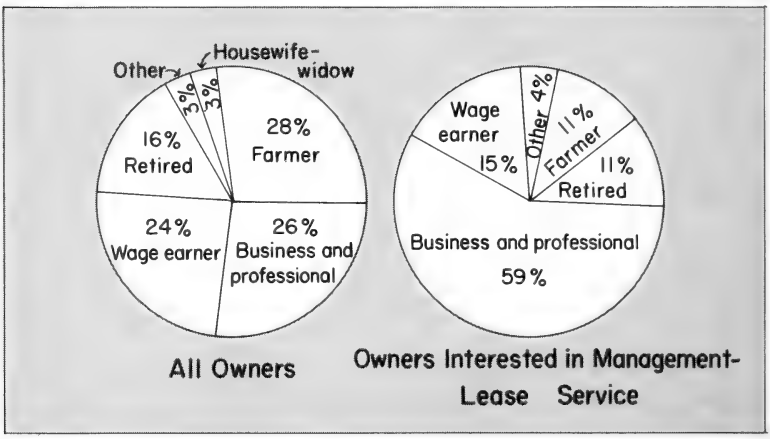


FIGURE 4. — Forest owners interested in management-lease service and all landowners, by occupation.

Intent of Forest Owners

Fifteen percent of the owners said they intended to grow timber on their land (table 7). One-fifth stated they had no specific reasons for keeping or using their forest land. Many owners apparently had never seriously considered a purpose for holding their forest land until the question was raised in the interview. Eleven percent of the owners considered their property merely a residence and the timbered area incidental to ownership.

Table 7.--Land-use intent of small-forest owners in Wayne County, Missouri

(In percent)

Use intent	Owners
No discernible intent	20
Timber growing	15
Residence	11
Speculation	9
Holding for home-use wood	9
Grazing	7
Sell and get out	5
Family legacy	4
Recreation	4
Clearing for agriculture	3
Minerals	3
Timber liquidation	2
Sentimental attachment	2
Investment	2
To lease	1
Miscellaneous	2
Unknown	1
Total	100

Declared intent to grow timber was evaluated against past actions taken by the owner. Little evidence was revealed that owners expressing intent to grow timber really meant it. Many of them had not practiced forestry on their land, consulted a forester, or placed their land under an organized management arrangement. And most of those who had sold timber from their land had sold it without written agreement and without a measured timber scale.

Farmers and resident-owners were most interested in growing timber. As might be expected, size of woodland influenced this interest: the larger the tract the more appealing to the owner was the idea of managing his timber.

The Outlook

If the small-forest owners interviewed in Wayne County are typical of the Ozark Region, managed timber production on small forests in the future is not likely to increase much. More than four-fifths of the owners in the study area do not intend to try actively to increase their timber production now.

This situation has its bright side, however. The trend toward concentration of the larger "small" forest areas in the hands of a few owners who evidence interest and activity in managing their land is encouraging. The nonresident, business-professional, and retired owners who hold more than 100 acres each may be receptive to more education and extension efforts. The increasing number of owners who are doing a better job of selling their timber and who do seek forestry advice are evidence of the successful forestry extension and service work now being done. The very expression of intent to grow timber, while it may be inconsistent with action, shows the inroads made in public thinking by educational, extension, and service programs. And people's opinions and actions do change. The favorable public feeling toward forestry agencies and foresters is on the plus side also.

Better directed efforts at informing small owners of available services should encourage more owners to act. The indifference of the small owner to forest values on his land is a basic problem. Some of this is certainly due to his apparent belief that forestry is not profitable. Some may be due to other motives and pressures about which little is known today. Brief tenure, now so common on many properties, defeats sustained timber production. The reasons for present tenure patterns need to be more thoroughly studied.

Obstacles clearly exist in the path toward increased production from small, privately owned, forest tracts. Opportunities exist also. For example, the development of profitable recreational and wildlife uses as a supplement to timber could stimulate greater owner interest. Interest in management is highest and extended tenure likely among owners who control the largest forest area — the business and professional owner. And farmers who have expressed interest in timber management and own large tracts will continue to offer production potential as they have in the past. A key to greater production lies in

the strengthening of service and educational efforts to the point where the owners of larger tracts who have the potential for managing timber can be interested in its business possibilities.

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The Central States Forest Experiment Station is headquartered at Columbus, Ohio and maintains major field offices at:

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